Part Two

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The LURE of PERIL

Creelman's Courage on the Firing Line.

By Captain Fritz Duquesne.

THERE is no better known name in this country than that of James Creelman, and none more widely known in newspaper and literary circles east and west of the meridian of Greenwich, and north and south of the equator.

For what is he known? Ask, and no two men will give you the same answer. The New Yorker of the last generation knows James Creelman as the young newspaperman who was a terror to the grafters; the exposer of the great Broadway railroad fraud; the man whose articles caused the United States to reform its immigration laws; the man who stopped the garbage dumpers from polluting the New York Harbor; who practically became the public prosecutor in the columns of the paper he was writing for. Not only was the garbage dumping stopped, but the dumpers were punished.

The Westerner knows James Creelman as the man who followed the Sioux war. In Italy he is known as the first man to interview the Pope. In London they know him as the correspondent of half a dozen newspapers. In Paris, Monsieur James Creelman is known as the man who established a reputation for the European New York Herald. In Russia he is known as the friend of the great Tolstoy, with whom he once lived. In Mexico he is the personal friend and biographer of President Diaz. In Cuba he is known as the man who placed the responsibilities of the massacres of the natives right at Butcher Weyler's door. Americans remember that James Creelman led the charge of the soldiers at El Caney during the Spanish-American war. The State department knows him as a trusted servant of the republic. Most of the world's people remember him as the American war correspondent who, at the risk of his life, exposed the atrocities of the Japanese soldiers during their war against the Chinese. Everyone who was old enough to read remembers what a sensation the Creelman articles caused at the time, and what a cry of horrified protest rose in the civilized world against the cruelties of the Japanese who massacred every man, woman and child in Port Arthur after the town had surrendered to them.

A few months ago James Creelman resigned the editorship of a leading magazine to become a Commissioner of Education of New York, and to get enough time to finish his biography of President Diaz of Mexico, which will also be a history of Mexico's development under the guiding brain of the great ruler.

James Creelman started his life without any education to speak of, but that handicap was no obstacle to him. It merely gave an outlet to his volcanic mental and physical energy. He educated himself, taught himself a couple of languages, and the most difficult profession known, that of writing for, running and editing a newspaper, and all before he was twenty-seven. He is not yet beyond middle age, and the above are only a few of the things he has accomplished, a selection of incidents from the busy life of America's most versatile journalist.

James Creelman, despite his vast acquaintance is very conservative in his friendships, and it is only a favored few that are on intimate terms enough with him to enter his home. Home it is, and more; it is a repository of one of the finest collections of antiques, art, and curiosities that have been gotten together in the United States. From the cellar to the attic, in every corner and every inch of wall space are crowded highly valued treasures, every one of which has a history, and most of which came into the possession of their present owner through some strange happening or some weird adventure. Marbles and bronzes from Pompeii, jewels from the prehistoric graves of Mexico, treasure chests from the royal palace of Corea, uniforms and weapons from the battlefield of Ping Yang, swords, tapestries, masterpieces, ancient and modern armor, ancient bronze cannon, autograph photographs from the world's great men, rugs from Persian treasure houses, carpets from European palaces, everything from everywhere, and each precious piece with its enchanting history. One can hardly imagine a man who has led such an active life, roaming the world with warring armies, editing newspapers, fighting for the country against unfair treaties, and writing books, finding time to gather such a treasure.

Ask James Creelman to tell of some or his hair-breadth escapes.

"Look here, now," he'll answer, "I've past that age; I am interested in the more serious things of life. I am interested in writing my life of President Diaz for D. Appleton & Co., and the problem of educating the mighty army of New York children."

One glance around the study, with its well-worn, almost worn out, volumes, from the Enclycopedia Britannia to the last masterpiece of Rostand, tells one it is a hopeless task to draw the great war correspondent out of his studious preoccupation to the dangers of the many bloody battlefields on which he has been the eye witness of civilization, if he has not taken an active part, as he did at El Caney, of which he was the hero.

What made Creelman face death times out of number? His duty to his paper did not call for that. True, the ambition of the correspondent is to get a beat, but he is hardly likely to get anything else but a bullet when leading an attack, as Creelman did at El Caney, armed with a formidable lead pencil. Was it duty that made him assume the responsibilities of a United States officer, and rush the Spanish fort, or was it the lure of peril?

Creelman refuses to talk adventure, so to get this story it was necessary to explore the pigeonholes of a London newspaper office, where this fragment of his adventurous life is stored: I chose to be with the right wing of our army before Santiago, because I was assured by General Shafter, the commanding general, that the center and left wings would not be seriously engaged until another day. The right wing, Lawton's division, containing Chaffee's brigade, was to occupy the extreme right of our whole line, and was to attack the foot of El Caney at daybreak. I had already been outside our lines scouting and examining the Spanish entrenchments. For days I never knew what it was to have dry clothes on, so great was my desire to understand clearly the nature of the action that was about to occur. I knew from the isolated locality of El Caney that the right wing would be practically independent of the rest of the army, and a very desperate engagement might be expected there. From a newspaper point of view, the scene at El Caney, with our infantry closing on the stone fort, entrenchments and blockhouses, was likely to be the supreme spectacle of the battle of Santiago.

I had no horse and had to go on foot. At three o'clock on the morning of the battle, before it was daylight, I left headquarters alone for the front. In spite of the fact that the sun was not yet up the air was intensely hot. I had to walk to El Paso, where the base of the center of the army was fixed, and then I followed a narrow trail through the chaperell for about five miles to the right in company with a Cuban scout. I had to wade across streams and tear my way through thick bush until my hands and face bled from the scratches. I reached a hilltop in time to see the first shot of the fight fired from a great distance to our rear at the stone fort on the hill guarding El Caney. On this hill flew the only Spanish flag anywhere in sight, and the first shot of the battle was fired at that mark. The thought came into my mind that perhaps before the day was done I might have that flag in my possession. I could not hear anything of our infantry, which was advancing slowly, but had not yet come into range; neither could I see our lines because of the hills and the thick bush. But I knew that if I wanted to write something intensely human and full of the finest elements of fighting interest, I must manage without guidance to get a place where I could see our infantry close in upon the fort and its neighboring intrenchments. Presently I came across two other correspondents, who had not been under fire before, and who agreed to follow my lead, although expressing doubts as to my prudence. Of course, I was not prudent; perhaps I was not wise; but when you come down to the plain facts, no thoroughly prudent man ever undertook to be a war correspondent in the field.

My sole idea was to get close to the fort before our troops arrived, for a man can see little with his own eyes if he is in the rear. At last we got on a hill in front of the fort within very close range of the Spanish riflemen. There was only a tiny valley between us and the enemy—so close were we, indeed, that we could see them at work without our glasses. At this time we found that we were directly in line of fire between our battery in the rear and the fort, intended to arrest any charge.

The Spaniards began to fire from the loopholes of the fort and the breastworks to the right kept up a heavy rain of bullets from Mauser and Remington repeaters. Our lines moved on closer and took up a fixed position, the Twelfth infantry regiment moving against the forts by separate companies operating independently and the Seventeenth regiment, under the personal direction of General Chaffee, lying on a ridge immediately in front of the main breastworks thrown up before the village.

After several hours of firing I left the hill and found Company C of the Twelfth regiment in a roadway pouring a deadly fire against the trench in front of the fort. I induced Captain Walsh, who commanded, to bring his company up the hill where I had been standing which commanded the trench. General Chaffee was with the Seventh and Seventeenth regiments. My purpose was to let him know what had been going on and if possible to ascertain whether our troops had been under fire from their comrades on the other side of the hill. When I reached General Chaffee I found the two regiments lying on their faces hard at work with their rifles, while the Spaniards were keeping up a terrific fire. Scores of wounded lay on the field, while here and there was one dead. The only man standing was General Chaffee, who raged up and down behind his men, swearing and urging on the fight. I never saw a finer soldier, and never a more warlike face. His eyes seemed to flash fire as he stormed up and down the line. While I was talking to him a bullet clipped a button from his breast. He smiled in a half-startled, half-amused way. I was so exhausted by this time that I could hardly stand up, and when I sat down in the shadow of a tree General Chaffee joined me for a few moments. I told him how close I had been to the fort and its trench, and gave him, as nearly as I could, an estimate of the number of Spaniards alive on the hill. Then I suggested a charge and offered to show the troops, if he sent them, a safe way up the hill. The general sent infantry to investigate and in a few minutes Company F of the Twelfth was making a reconnaisance. I descended to a little mango grove at the foot of the hill from which the rush was to be made. Just as I got there Company F started up the wrong side of the hill—that is, the side towards the village, and not the side we had been firing upon. Almost immediately the soldiers came shrieking down the hill, some of them wounded. They had encountered the main fire of the enemy from the breastworks in front of Chaffee's position. I talked to Captain Clark, who commanded the company, and told him of my plan, but he was not very enthusiastic about it. I sat down under a mango tree with the soldiers and jotted down some notes of my story. We were at that time in the very vortex of the cross fire. The bark was chipped from the trees by the storm of bullets. The sound was like the cry of wild animals in agony.

At this juncture Captain Haskell, acting adjutant of the battalion to which Company F belonged, came down to where I was—a fine old white-bearded, clear-eyed veteran. I told him that I thought the fort could be taken without the loss of a life by a charge on the wrinkled side of the hill. He promptly accepted my offer to lead the way and ordered Company F and part of another company to follow me. I stepped through the line of bushes, followed by Captain Haskell and the troops, and started up the hill. The troops came on slowly, and when I found myself actually out on the clear, escarped slope leading up to the trench, where even a mouse could not hide itself, I walked fast. I could see the lines of soldiers on all sides watching the ascent. Gradually I got away from our line, so that by the time I was within twenty feet of the barbed wire fence I was at least two hundred feet ahead of Captain Haskell and his men. I was absolutely alone. I stopped for a moment and examined the fort and trench, only a few feet from me, and whilst I stood there I could hear my heart beating like a hammer on an anvil.

For the first time I realized my danger, any instant might see my death. With a supreme effort I flung off my fear. I turned around and, making a scissorslike motion of my fingers, indicated to Captain Haskell that I wanted men with wire cutters. He hurried forward two gallant fellows who, without a word, obeyed my signals and cut the fence down. It took but a few seconds to do this, and I stepped through the fence and walked up to the trench, standing on the edge and looking into it. The trench was filled with dead and dying men. Those who were unhurt were crouching down waiting for the end. I made a signal to one of the privates who had cut the wire fence to advance and cover the men in the trench with his rifle, and when he had done it I ordered the Spaniards, who had not even looked at me, to stand up and surrender. They leaped up at once and dropped their rifles. I must say it took a little of the glory out of my work when I saw how pleased they looked to get through with the matter so easily. Then I jumped across the trench and ran around to the entrance of the fort which was at the side. I wanted to get the flag. I wanted it for my country, and I wanted it for my newspaper.

Although I could not tell what danger lurked in the fort it was too late to think of turning back, because a volley could have ended me at that moment. As I entered the fort the scene I beheld was too horrible for words to express. Our fire had killed most of its defenders. I found near the door the officer in command, surrounded by all of the garrison that was left alive. A wail of terror went up from the wounded men, writhing in their blood on the floor, as they saw me. Just inside the door stood a young Spanish officer, surrounded by his men. His face was bloodless and his lips were drawn away from his teeth in a ghastly way. Beside him was a soldier holding a ramrod, to which was fastened a white handkerchief—a mute appeal for life.

The officer threw his hands up. He could speak French. Would he surrender? Yes, yes, Yes! Do with him what we pleased. Did he understand that if his men fired another shot his safety could not be assured? Yes, yes, yes; and every Spaniard dropped his weapon.

I looked above the roofless walls for the flag. It was gone. A lump came in my throat. The prize had disappeared. "A shell carried the flag away," said the Spanish officer. "It is lying outside." Dashing through the door and running around to the side facing El Caney, I saw the red and yellow flag lying in the dust, a fragment of the staff still attached to it. I picked it up and wagged it at the intrenched village. A wiser man would have refrained from that challenge, but I was not wise that day. Instantly the Spanish intrenchments on the village slopes replied with volleys, and I ran, in a cloud of dust, to the other side of the fort, where out soldiers seized the captured flag, waved it and cheered like madmen. From every hillside came the sound of shouting troops as the torn symbol of victory was tossed from hand to hand.

Although bullets were beating around the door of the fort, Captain Haskell, who with Captain Clark had kept the rifles of Company F busily employed, agreed to enter and assure the prisoners of their safety.

We went in, and while we stood talking to the Spanish officer, I felt a stinging pain in the upper part of the left arm, as though a blow had been struck with a shut fist. The sensation was no more and no less than that which might have come from a rough punch by some too hilarious friend. It whirled me half around but did not knock me down. The next moment there was a numbness in the arm, a darting pain in the hand and a sharp sensation in the back. The arm hung loose as though it did not belong to me. A Mauser bullet, entering one of the loopholes, had smashed the arm and torn a hole in my back.

It is not necessary to describe how I staggered to a hammock in a compartment of the fort and lay there, hearing my own blood drip; how Major John A. Logan and five of his gallant men passed me out of the fort through a hole made by our artillery, and how I was carried down the hill and laid on the roadside among the wounded, with the captured Spanish colors thrown over me. After all, it was a mere personal incident in a well-fought battle, and hundreds of other men had suffered more.

Our troops were still fighting their way into the village, and we could hear the savage rip-rip of the rifles in the distance and hear the calling of bugles.

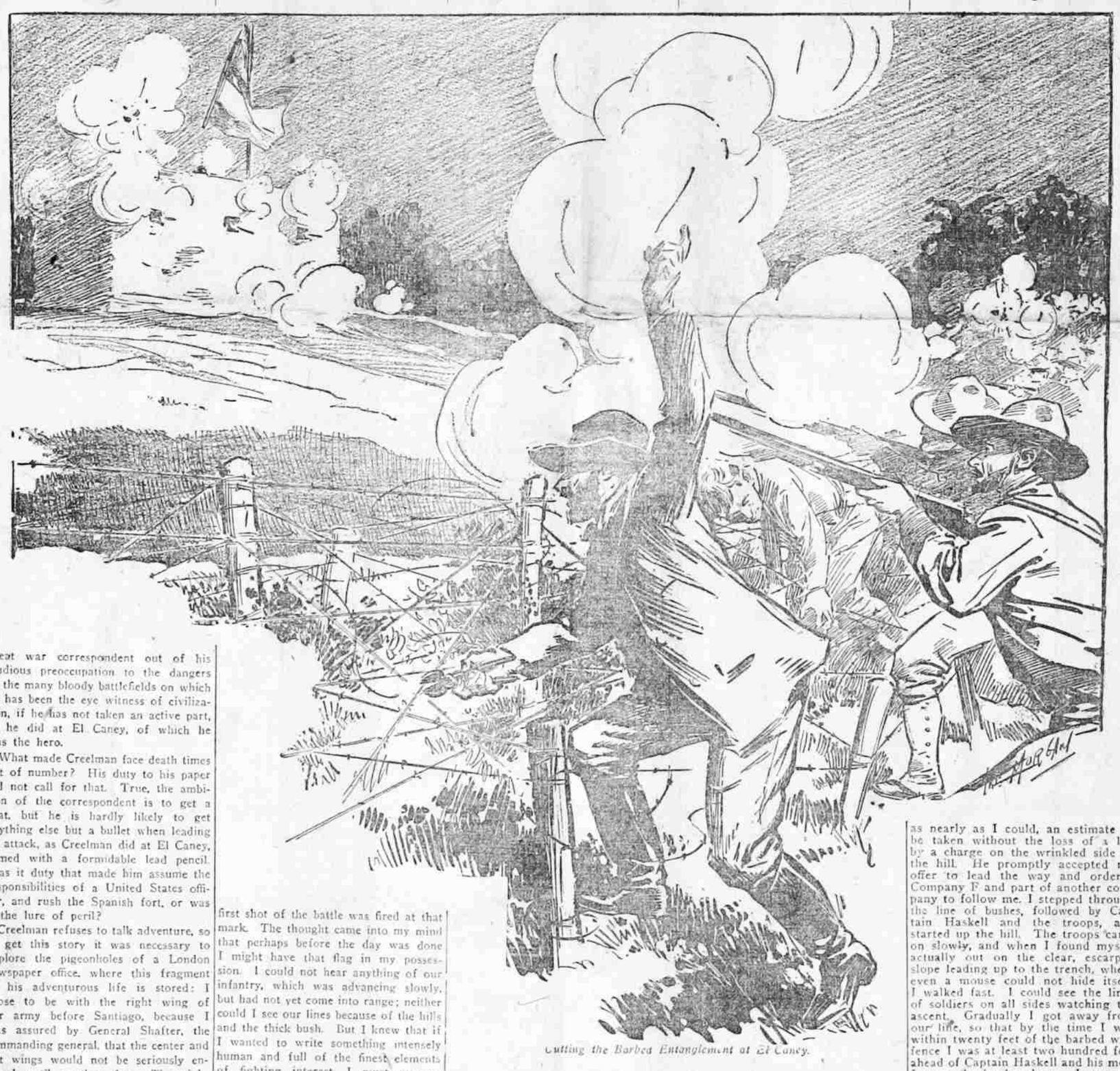
Then an American flag was carried past us on its way to the fort, and brave Captain Haskell, with bullet holes in his neck and leg, lifted himself painfully on one elbow to greet it. A wounded negro soldier raised his bloody hand to his head in salute. Bullets rang above the heads of the surgeons as they bent over the victims.

The heat was terrific. Things swam in the air. There was a strange yellow glare over everything. Voices of thunder seemed to come from the blurred figures moving to and fro. A horse twenty feet high stamped the earth with his feet and made the distant mountains rock. Little fiery blobs kept dropping down from somewhere and the world was whirling upside down. Some one was being killed. Who was being killed? Why was the general standing on one leg and having all his buttons shot off? Copy! Copy! In one hour the paper goes to press!

A hand touched my fevered head. I opened my eyes. Mr. Hearst was on his knees at my side, a Luger in his belt and a pencil and note book in his hands. As the bullets hissed around us I dictated to him the story of the fight for his paper, for although I thought it was my last assignment my duty to my paper called for a beat. Between my swooning fits I jerked out the sentences till the copy was complete. A few directions, a shake of the hand, and as my senses again commenced to swim I saw Hearst gallop off to the coast in a race to win a beat.

In a sort of haze I saw an ambulance attendant stoop over me. "Doctor," he said, "I guess this war correspondent's all in; he's about bled to death, judging from looks." "Carry him out of danger and I'll attend to him as soon as I get through with this poor devil," answered the doctor.

Thanks to a good constitution I am still capable of covering an assignment.



Cutting the Barbed Entanglement at El Caney.